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SUBJECT: MILITARY VIEWS ON ELECTIONS AND AFTERMATH

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Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES CHARLES H. TWINING FOR REASON 1.4 (B,D
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¶1. (C) Summary. Two high-level military officials express concerns about civilian abilities to govern while listening to our urging non-interference of the military in the presidential elections just ahead. The armed forces intend to focus on their own role and needs in the post-transition period. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Introduction. Charge and DATT called on two key military officials January 9 to reiterate the need for a credible conclusion to the electoral process, including non-interference by the military or other elements in the presidential election, and to elicit views as to the role the armed forces may be expected to play in the post-transition phase under a civilian government. Our visits follow charges that the ruling Military Council or elements of it are interfering in the process by supporting a particular candidate (reftel).

¶3. (C) Colonel Abderrahmane Ould Boubacar, Armed Forces Chief of Staff and member of the Military Council, claimed the military is staying away from politics and will maintain its non-involvement in the electoral process. At the same time, like President Vall he criticized the weakness of parties in this country and the propensity of candidates to want the highest office in government without having thought through, or presented, the detailed programs that they will seek to implement.

¶4. (C) Charge acknowledged that both claims have some validity and said we see the role of diplomats includes that of helping focus the candidates on the need to have concrete programs, including their vision of the future of the armed forces. Continuing, Charge said he was concerned that there is insufficient contact and dialogue existing between military and civilians, which can produce misunderstandings and suspicions. He hoped that channels could be opened to encourage frank exchanges.

¶5. (C) Colonel Boubacar, while again criticizing the candidates for having more ambition than anything else, also acknowledged that discussion between the two sides could be useful. After so many years of military rule, he said, the desire is not to turn over the government to civilian control that has little understanding of the country's problems and would make a mess out of things and be unable to deal with

threats to national security. This would only result in the military retaking power. We agreed that that was not what we wish to see, either. The new government emerging from the elections has to be one capable of governing.

16. (C) As for the post-transition phase, Colonel Boubacar said the armed forces have just started taking a hard look at their overall posture, realizing that considerable work needs to be done to make them modern and effective. That should be the focus following the transition, using the military for the purpose for which it is intended: to protect the national borders and waters. Boubacar asked that the USG consider expanding its own programs of military cooperation in the post-transition period in this regard.

17. (C) The Secretary General of the Ministry of National Defense, Colonel Dia Elhadj Abderrahmane, while not a member of the Military Council, nevertheless reports directly to President Vall in the latter's capacity as Minister of Defense and for this reason is an important interlocutor. The Colonel insists that he does not get into politics, which in his mind includes elections and civil-military relations. He suggested that military personnel are well integrated into civil society, as interested in democracy as anyone. As evidence he cited the considerable amount of vote splitting in areas where personnel voted.

18. (C) While not wanting to comment on the need for dialogue, Colonel Dia expressed concern that candidates for President play by the rules and accept the final result. In that connection, we observed that if all, including the military, follow the rules and do not interfere in the process, we would hope our own level of cooperation would rise after the transition. He said that was his hope, as well. Dia added that in the post-transition period the military intends to assume its traditional role, which it has never forgotten,

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and work to improve its capabilities to carry it out. He acknowledged that the armed forces will be watching, however, to make sure the new civilian government assumes its responsibilities. Dia said Mauriticians know the world is looking at their experiment with democracy that, if successful, will help bring both stability to the region and serve as a model to the Arab world.

19. (C) Comment. It is clear that there is anxiety about the future among military leaders such as these, and we wish we could see both the military and civilians lay their cards on the table and talk to one another frankly. We are not particularly sanguine that this will occur, however, and it is certainly possible that some officers are taking it upon themselves to try to "arrange" things so that their future interests, including a genuine interest in maintaining the accomplishments of the Vall government, are preserved and protected. In the final analysis, it is not clear the extent to which "arrangements" made to elect the "right" candidate will truly make a difference, particularly if the actual balloting is done credibly. The Embassy will continue to monitor the situation closely, as well as to urge greater dialogue and debate.

Twining